

# Little proof of Sandinista drug role seen

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WASHINGTON - One of the more dramatic moments in President Reagan's televised speech Sunday night urging passage of his \$100 million aid package to the Nicaraguan rebels came when he pointed to a grainy, two-year-old photograph that he alleged shows a Nicaraguan government official placing a load of drugs aboard a plane bound for the United States.

"The Sandinistas have ... involved themselves in the international drug trade," Reagan said. "Top Nicaraguan officials are deeply involved in drug trafficking."

Corroborating Reagan's assertion of Sandinista involvement in the multibillion-dollar drug trade is difficult. While one Nicaraguan aide - the one shown in the televised photograph - has been indicted in the United States for cocaine smuggling, several government officials, including sources on two congressional committees, say there are only shreds of evidence to support Reagan's suggestion that other Nicaraguan officials are entrenched in the illicit business.

"We've learned nothing that shows any ringing [involvement] of the Sandinistas in drug trafficking," said an aide to a Narcotics Control Task Force of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, which held a hearing on the issue last week. "Granted this is difficult to track down ... but what there is so far is only bits and pieces."

The Senate intelligence committee has also looked into the matter, but "no hard evidence has emerged," said a spokesman. "There is some information that certainly some Sandinistas are involved, as there is concerning one group of contras [rebels]. But how high up they [the Sandinistas] are and how extensive it is is yet unknown."

[A senior administration official, according to Associated Press, acknowledged yesterday that the US government had reports of contra involvement in cocaine trafficking, but said the operations did not involve the principal US-backed Nicaraguan rebel group.

[Elliot Abrams, assistant secretary of state for inter-American affairs, told a House appropriations subcommittee that the administration only had reports implicating members of the Costa Rica-based ARDE rebel faction led by Eden Pastora and said allegations against other groups were false.]

## Testimony given

The difficulty in providing a clear picture of Sandinista involvement in drug trafficking is illustrated by the testimony given to the House Narcotics Control Task Force on March 11. A deputy administrator of the US Drug Enforcement Administration told the committee that except for "sporadic allegations" the agency has only one criminal case tying Nicaraguan officials to drug trafficking. However, an assistant secretary of the State Department and a former Sandinista official testified that the evidence gathered in the case shows the drug trafficking is being condoned - if not participated in - by other leading members of the Sandinistas.

"The information we have received indicates a particularly disturbing pattern of officially sanctioned drug crimes," said Jon R. Thomas, head of the State Department's Bureau of International Narcotics Matters.

As for specifics, Thomas said the unit responsible for cracking down on narcotics in Nicaragua has made few arrests, Sandinista officials use marijuana and other narcotics and sell the drugs among themselves and that several drug offenders have been commissioned as Sandinista police supervisors.

While unsubstantiated, more damaging information about Sandinistas condoning drug trafficking came from Alvaro Baldizon Aviles, a former chief investigator for the Nicaraguan Interior Ministry, who fled the Central American country last July.

Baldizon said he had been told in mid-1984 by two associates of Interior Minister Tomas Borge

that the Nicaraguan government was involved in drug trafficking with "the Colombian Mafia."

The Nicaraguan official who has been indicted for drug trafficking in the United States is an aide to Borge. Frederico Vaughan, who was one of four men shown in the photograph that President Reagan displayed during his televised address, was indicted in 1984 for involvement in a cocaine smuggling operation with three Colombians.

According to the indictment, Vaughan and ten conspirators arranged for a "large quantity" of Colombian cocaine to be transhipped through Nicaragua to the United States in 1984. The investigation, according to Thomas G. Byrne, of the US Drug Enforcement Administration, also learned that the Colombians planned to establish cocaine laboratories in Nicaragua. Five of the defendants in the case have pleaded guilty or been convicted. The six others, including Vaughan, are fugitives.

Byrne, who supervises DEA's intelligence unit, would not say whether the Vaughan case reflects the well-entrenched involvement of Nicaraguan officials in drug trafficking, as characterized in President Reagan's speech. As Byrne told the committee, the case "is the only documented investigation DEA has conducted involving the use of Nicaragua as a transshipment point."